

Sandra George's Social Documentary Photography

Jenny Brownrigg

Curator and writer Jenny Brownrigg is Exhibitions Director and Reader (Research) in Curating at the Glasgow School of Art; she has a particular interest in overlooked twentieth-century women photographers in Scotland. She curated an exhibition of Sandra George's work at 5 Florence Street, Glasgow (2024) as part of Glasgow International Festival of Contemporary Art.

Born in Nottingham, Sandra George (1957 – 2013) spent her first seven years in Jamaica with her mother before moving to Birmingham, and then Edinburgh, to live with her father. She became a community worker in Edinburgh from the 1980s onwards. Sandra¹ studied throughout, gaining her BA in Photography from Napier Technical College (now Edinburgh Napier University) in 1982; then 22 years later, in 2004, her BA Hons in Drawing and Painting from Edinburgh College of Art;² and an MA in Community Education from the University of Edinburgh. She was prolific, taking thousands of images of community projects across Scotland in the early 1980s to the late 2000s. Freelance photography,³ working with organisations and publications such as Shelter and the Craigmillar Chronicle, formed a separate commercial strand to her work, documenting cultural events such as the Edinburgh Festival.

During the time Sandra George (1957–2013) was making her photographs, the Conservative Party were at the helm of UK government for an extensive period, under Margaret Thatcher from 1979 until 1990. Thatcher cut spending on the welfare state, to 'aid' the British economy, believing that a collective provision for unemployment and sickness benefits was demotivating working-class people's drive to work. She gave rise to the much-quoted phrase 'there is no such thing as society'.¹ Certain of Sandra's photographs capture the austerity created by this political landscape, such as the bleak 'claims' building with its shutters down in *Craigmillar Social Work* (1988). However, she also documented the resistance to the regime. In *Unemployment Demo – Glasgow* (1981), members of the Young Communist League perform music on the back of a small lorry that is pasted with posters reading 'End Unemployment. Get Them Out!'

It is against this backdrop that Sandra dedicated herself to working purposefully with those whom Thatcher sought to demonise. Sandra's social documentary photography is primarily of Edinburgh communities, in particular Craigmillar, Wester Hailes, Greendykes and Niddrie. In 2024, Christian Noelle Charles² found Sandra's Filofax in the holdings of charity Craigmillar Now (see Foreword); it contained a manifesto she had written on photography that included: 'Stop making assumptions about people' and 'Start from the level people are based.' These sentiments are the polar opposite of Thatcher's diatribe against the working classes. Furthermore, Sandra's younger brother, Kubara Zamani, in an interview in *Black Oot Here: Black Lives in Scotland*, remarked that Sandra had 'been very influential on me and my

¹ Calling Sandra by her first name, and not her surname, throughout is a choice preferred by her family.

² At ECA, Sandra was able to experiment with other disciplines, including jewelry and stained glass.

³ She was a member of the National Union of Journalists.

political development because she was interested in Black issues'.³ This combination of politics, community, Black identity and an advocacy that acknowledged those oppressed in British society – whether by class, disability or being racially minoritised – formed the bedrock of Sandra's work throughout her life. The people that Sandra photographed were always seen through a lens of power and never as victims. Her work intentionally avoided both tokenism and stereotype.⁴

Sandra's first important bodies of work were made when she was in her early twenties, while at Napier Technical College studying for her Higher National Diploma in Photography.⁵ These key series always show people's agency. During this period, amongst the situations she photographed were a women's hostel, a school for the blind, a workplace that predominantly employed visually impaired workers and a concert for musicians with disabilities. Her sensitive chronicling of life in Edinburgh's Victoria Hostel created a series of studies of intergenerational women and place. In a transient building where a preconception from an onlooker may be one of despair, Sandra instead captured small, intimate, moments, as with *Edinburgh Victoria Hostel* (1981): while one woman lights up, a younger woman to her left hugs her boyfriend from behind. Sandra's use of both natural and artificial light is poignant in this series. In one photograph of two women sitting in institutional chairs, *Victoria Hostel* (1981), the younger woman is almost spotlit, sitting with legs up on her chair. In contrast, the older woman, entirely in shadow, leans forward, cigarette in hand, and looks directly into the camera. Of this work (and of how they met), her former partner Jim Hewitt said:

*Sandra was photographing the women living in the hostel going about their daily lives. Sandra being Sandra would spend days and nights staying in the hostel with the women. I was there supervising a group of offenders on community service orders carrying out maintenance work on the building.*⁶

Hewitt's information, coupled with her contact sheets, held by Craigmillar Now as part of her archive, illustrate that she did not 'parachute' into specific communities and then leave. Rather she took care to build trust with those she photographed.

Her preferred working method was to work in sequence, often over a period of time. In *Blindcraft, Edinburgh* (1980),⁷ Sandra set the scene with strong establishing shots from the factory floor, with workers fabricating bed springs and mattresses. She then focused on Robert, the receptionist, capturing both his ebullient personality and his role in the workplace with the particular tools of his trade – the Tannoy speaker system and the braille reader (*Bob Lawrie – Edinburgh Craigmillar Workshop*, 1981). As well as having positioned herself inside his little office in the shop area, there are photographs where she changed her perspective, going out into the showroom to look back in. The *Blindcraft* series⁸ also shows a photography workshop and groups with children taking place. Such photography workshops can be seen across the years in Sandra's archive. They show the importance she placed on democratically sharing skills and empowering others to take photographs.

Sandra's interest in children and place began in this period too. Her gaze and camera get down to the level of children, observing them in the classroom, at formal play in

institutional settings, and then wilder play in playgrounds and outdoors. The last is always free from any obvious adult instruction. Her observations in school gyms, from tentative work on the wall bars to walking a beam, capture learning and growing agency over self. Outdoors, children gesticulate from their positions on an unlit bonfire made from scrap wood and abandoned furnishings in *Leith* (1979). Behind them, the word 'playground' has been spraypainted crudely onto the wall of a vacant building. Play and learning, however, are not ableist. *Donaldson's School, Edinburgh* (1991), a school for the deaf, shows the moment a child, upside down, vaults over a horse.

Sandra's photographs that relate to place continually undermine preconceptions. Whilst some record aspects such as ruined buildings, Sandra equally showed the power of the self-organising community to create a good sense of place – including documenting gala days and free concerts. Her approach is the antithesis to only showing multiple deprivations. She also did not shy away from recording racism in Scotland. *Restalrig Road Shop* (1985) depicts a shop exterior – the Wee Supermarket – which had been targeted with racist graffiti and daubed with white paint. Sandra recorded this, choosing to capture the young son of the shop owner standing defiantly next to the graffiti, with his hands on his hips.

A further key strand to Sandra's work was the documentation of protests, which she undertook over a twenty-year period. In England, she photographed anti-racism demonstrations in the West Midlands, including *Birmingham Anti-National Front Demo* (1981) and *Wolverhampton Anti-National Front Demo* (1981). In Scotland, this strand of practice focused on Edinburgh, with her subjects including an *Elderly People's Demo* (1981), an *Anti Sex Shop Demo* (1981), an *Unemployment Demo* (1987), *A Night for the ANC* (1987) and a demonstration on the Mound, Princes Street, Edinburgh, organised by Access Ability (1998). As well as capturing people mid-protest, she also had an ability to compose the scene to get to the heart of the matter. In *Anti Sex Shop Demo*, it is the text that does the talking. The only presence of the demonstration – the placards declaring 'Porn degrades women' – are set against the shop's frosted window front with its own message of 'Adult Videos' and 'American import mags'. Furthermore, Sandra waited for the aftermath, to ironically focus on the male presence in the scene. The shop owner and policeman are centre stage, engaged casually in conversation on the steps as if nothing had happened. The theme of women countering violence against women was also dominant in her documentation of Edinburgh's Shakti Women's Aid, who support women of colour experiencing domestic abuse. Sandra recorded their activity over a four-year period from 1989 until 1993, showing their dedication and organising work: at an international women's day event; planning in their office; protesting; and at rest during a lunch break.

In Sandra's practice, there was an equally strong strand of self-portraiture and works featuring her own motherhood, family life and home. She charted her son Tyler from him being a premature baby in an incubator, throughout his childhood years. In one series, baby Tyler, dressed in white knitted clothes, lies on a bed, leaning into a black doll with Sandra's shadow cast over them both. Sandra also very much explored her own identity as a Black woman, through her self-portraits. In *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, Gen Doy outlines the importance of subjectivity as a means to return selfhood and agency to historically objectified black bodies.⁹ Sandra's gaze from the photographs is unwavering.

To place Sandra's work in a wider photographic context, particularly during the period when she was making work, Franki Raffles (1955–1994) and Jo Spence (1934–1992) are two useful comparisons.¹⁰ Raffles, another feminist social-documentary photographer, also worked in Edinburgh in the late 1980s, looking at violence against women, the inequalities for women at home and in the workplace, and protest, as well as utilising photography as a tool for people with disabilities. Whilst Jo Spence eventually eschewed social documentary photography, believing the image could not get fully at the social truth of the situation it observed, she and Sandra shared common concerns with class politics and making visible, in Spence's words, 'just how profoundly silenced people are who are in the position of being disabled'.¹¹ Sandra achieved this visibility through documenting the selfhood of people with disabilities, such as a young man working in a William Low supermarket (*North Edinburgh Action Group*, 1989).

There is undoubtedly a level of access involved in photographing vulnerable groups, which Sandra had through her own community work, that would not be possible today. However, Sandra's social documentary photography was never 'class tourism'¹² or voyeuristic. Embedded in communities, her approach and keen advocacy gave people who the State had placed outside the system a perceived cultural mainstream, a presence and a voice. A statement from her later artist-book work, *Identity* (2004), also provides an insight into her position on social documentary photography and the power of alternative representation. She acknowledged:

*I commence from a privileged position, one of experiencing and observing difference in different settings. ... The official form of culture described as mainstream seems alien to me, as I recognise individuals and not the classification of people. The 'mainstream' attitude only serves to perpetuate antiquated and mythological views of culture and society.*¹³

Overlooked in her own lifetime, her work is of key importance in the history of photography in Scotland and the UK. As a Black photographer, her archive held at Craigmillar Now is important in terms of representation, ethics and equality, as archives have so far been a largely white pursuit. In turn, whilst the communities she worked with have always remembered her, the resonance of her work is now being felt by curators, audiences and, in particular, a current generation of Black and other global majority practitioners.

¹ Her words were actually '... and who is society? There is no such thing!' See, for example, 'Margaret Thatcher: There's No Such Thing as Society', *New Learning*, at <https://newlearningonline.com>.

² Christian Noelle Charles is an artist and curator, living in Glasgow. She is co-curator of Sandra George's solo exhibition at City Art Centre, Edinburgh (30 May–27 September 2026), which this publication accompanies.

³ Zamani, in Francesca Sobande and Layla-Roxanne Hill, *Black Out Here: Black Lives in Scotland*, Bloomsbury Academic (2022), p. 159.

⁴ 'Tokenism' and 'Stereotypes' appear as words in Sandra's thoughts on photography, written down in her Filofax and currently held in Craigmillar Now's holdings-

⁵ Sandra studied at Napier Technical College between 1979 and 1982.

⁶ It was while Hewitt was supervising the same work, years later at Craigmillar Now – with offenders cleaning the garden around the centre – that Craigmillar Now connected with him. He gave them Sandra’s collection for safe keeping. This quote is from a transcript for an article that became: Neil Cooper, ‘Sandra George: A Life in Pictures – Craigmillar Now and Then’, *Bella Caledonia* (21 June 2022), at <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2022/06/21/sandra-george-a-life-in-pictures-craigmillar-now-and-then>.

⁷ The Edinburgh Blindcraft bed factory was based in Craigmillar and closed in 2011. It had operated since 1793, when it was established as the Royal Blind Asylum, and became well known for making beds and mattresses. At the point of the City of Edinburgh Council shutting it down, citing the factory as being loss-making, more than 60 per cent of Blindcraft’s employees were people with disabilities or visual impairments (BBC News, 10 February 2011).

⁸ In some instances, Sandra’s photography operates as social history – Edinburgh’s Blindcraft closed in 2011 (see note 11).

⁹ Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, I.B. Tauris (1999), p. 111. This book was in Sandra’s collection, currently held at Craigmillar Now.

¹⁰ Catherine Spencer has identified Raffles and Spence in her essay ‘To Let You Understand: Franki Raffles, Feminist Networks and Solidarity’, in *Franki Raffles: Photography, Activism, Campaign Works*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (2024), p. 18, published on the occasion of the same-titled exhibition at BCCA (2024–5). Spencer also co-curated (with Vivian K. Sheng) a Travelling Gallery exhibition, ‘Between Women’ (2025), that included Sandra and Raffles and highlighted these overlaps of subject matter and interest. (The other artists shown in ‘Between Women’ were Sylvia Grace Borda, Carolyn Scott and Niu Weiyu.)

¹¹ Jo Spence and David Hevey, ‘Body Language’, in *Creative Camera: 30 Years of Writing*, Manchester University Press (1999), ed. David Brittain, p. 206. A copy of this book is in Sandra’s collection at Craigmillar Now.

¹² Noni Stacey, *Photography of Protest and Community: The Radical Collectives of the 1970s*, Lund Humphries (2020), p. 59.

¹³ *Identity* (2004), an artist book by Sandra George, held by Craigmillar Now. As quoted in Beth Williamson, ‘Sandra George’, *Studio International*, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/sandra-george-review-5-florence-street-glasgow-international-festival-of-contemporary-art>, 18 June 2024, a review of Sandra’s Glasgow International exhibition, 5 Florence Street, Glasgow (2024).